Alternative (or Non-Traditional) Education

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 When discussing education with a group of people, it is almost inevitable that one of them will be able to tell you the ways in which our traditional education system has failed them. Every single person seems to have a subject that they struggled with, wished they could have learned in different ways, or just had issues engaging with the content or seeing how the content applied to the world around them. Throughout the history of education, students have not been receiving the instruction and skills that they need to be successful. In order to combat the epidemic of students suffering from our educational system, alternative schools were developed.

From the 1830’s until the twentieth century, schools operated on a narrow model of what was considered to be best practice. This included having children sit in conventional rows of desks, sit quietly, listen to the teacher lecture for the entire class period, and memorize information. In the history of alternative schools, reform has come from a variety of people, from social reformers to parents advocating for their struggling students. Regardless of how the reform looked, however, all reformers share the same common goal: to make learning engaging and to help students develop in all areas of their life (socially, morally, intellectually, emotionally) rather than just academically.

Alternative schools were emerging as early as the 1830’s, with transcendentalist writers creating their own alternative schools (such as Bronson Alcott and The Temple School in 1834). Another option of alternative schooling that has been used regularly throughout the history of education is home-schooling. If parents did not elect to send their child to school, they had the ability to teach their child at home. In the 1960’s this movement began to truly catch on in the United States, with Raymond Moore vocalizing his concerns about institutional and public schooling.

Alternative schools began to align themselves with philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ideas of education, which placed the development of the student in all areas of life as the focus of the school, rather than the societal demands. In the early 1800’s, Josef Neef founded child-centered schools in three states in the U.S.. Later, Maria Montessouri would open her first “children’s home” in 1907, creating a safe haven for students to grow and develop as well as to learn. During the 1960’s, the same education reform that enhanced the homeschool movement also helped alternative education flourish. Because of the discrimination faced by a plethora of students as well as the dangerous society and culture of America, more people began examining education and proposing an alternative to the traditional. The majority of public schools, however, function in a more traditional manner, despite the fact that Reagan’s “A Nation at Risk”, Clinton’s “Goal’s 2000”, and Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” are continuing to prove that the way we do public education is not working.

Today, the answer to the education issue seems to come in the form of charter and magnet schools. In 1992, Missouri opened the first charter school and by 1996, there were almost 800 charter schools in twenty-five of the fifty states. For our project, we visited Harpswell Coastal Academy, a public charter school in Harpswell, ME. This school was a radically different experience from our own educational experiences. For us, essentialism and positivism seemed to be the most prevalent educational philosophies in our own education. The idea that we needed to know specific facts, dates, and events that were determined by our school board/teachers/someone who was not us. These two theories do not closely align with the mission of HCA, which is to “develop critical thinkers, leaders, and life-long learners who are actively engaged in their communities and the broader world” (harspwellcoastalacademy.org/about). Lectures play a large part of both positivism and essentialism, because they are both teacher-centered models of education. This is not true at HCA, and there is a large focus on going out into the community and learning from the world immediately around them through engagement and experimentation, which closely aligns with constructivism and progressivism.

At HCA, there is also a large focus on creating a positive learning environment so that all students feel involved and engaged, which corresponds to behaviorism. The teachers at HCA also put a large emphasis on connecting with their students and making sure that the students all feel as though they are a part of this school community. In order to emphasize this, they participate in CORE several times a week, where they talk about their lives and do personalized check-ins with one specific teacher, which emphasizes the bond between teacher and student such as humanism suggests. Although perennialism is teacher-centered, which is not how the curriculum is designed at HCA, the philosophy itself is similar. For example, the two main ideas that they are working with for the whole year at HCA are mapping Harpswell and learning about local food systems. Learning about how food is grown, sold, priced, cooked, and eaten is something that is essential for students to know in order to function independently as adults. Reconstructionism can also be seen in the curriculum because they are addressing not only how the food that we eat is grown, but what the impacts of our food system are on the planet, the animals, the workers, etc.

We all really believe in project-based learning, which was a huge part of the educational experience at HCA. We all believe that student engagement in their own education is key, as is creating lifelong learners. We all loved the independence of the students and their ability to be truly active participants in their own learning. Lauren also really appreciated how they are addressing the social issues in the school curriculum. This is a part of the CORE time that they spend with their specific teachers, which seems similar to homeroom but focuses on the social issues in their own lives as well as in their community. Also, through the food theme that they are working with, students are able to address all of the issues that accompany the food industry: buying local, organic food, sustainability, treatment of animals, transportation of food, GMOs, etc. We all felt that there were parts of the curriculum that needed to be teacher-centered, and the entire curriculum is provided by the teachers for the students. Although fieldwork is a large part of how the learning gets done, the teacher-centered focus comes in after the field trips or in the forms of mini-lectures when they are out in the field. The students also get to meet other members of their community, who give talks based on what they are experts in and the students learn that way.

Our visit at HCA, as well as our research for this project, really opened our eyes to all of the different possibilities for alternative education. After our time spent researching and visiting HCA, we all felt profoundly impacted after seeing how enthusiastic and engaged students were in this non-traditional school environment. We saw students doing hands-on work and exploring big ideas through their local community, as well as seeing how strong of a bond these students formed in their school community. Overall, our experience at HCA was very powerful and gave us a broader interpretation of what “classroom” and curriculum could look like.  
 We loved seeing enthusiastic and engaged students, and we all left HCA convinced that students need to be active participants in their education in order to gain something meaningful from it. We all loved the student-centered focus of HCA, as well as how they created a supportive school culture for all students. Our major concern in terms of integrating the non-traditional way that they were doing public education at HCA was how the content and curriculum piece fits in. HCA is a new school, so they are still working out the kinks of how much time to devote to each content area as well as what exactly they want to teach students. In addition, they do all of their day’s planning in the first hour before school starts, which makes it hard to integrate the backwards design model into the classroom and to establish solid curriculum in the way that we have been trained to do. Although we all anticipate that the chaos will subside as the school continues to develop, we were all in agreement that the curriculum piece needs to be worked on, as does the scheduling piece, before we would feel comfortable with teaching at HCA or a similar school.